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Cultivating Critical Mass

Building an Omnidirectional Mentoring Community

Sheila García Mazari, Naomi Binnie, Jesus Espinoza, Denise Leyton, and Rachel Woodbrook

Introduction

Career growth is a progressive and personal experience, both evolving organically and requiring intentionality. Finding your place within a library, an institution, or the field overall calls for exploration. Formal mentoring programs can help facilitate this exploration but are just one path among many that may support the diffuse ways we experience self-discovery. As library professionals, we move through our own journeys, impacted by colleagues around us, the experiences those people share with us, and the opportunities they show us. Cultivating an informal yet intentional omnidirectional mentoring community has helped each of us socialize our day-to-day activities by building consensus and a shared sense of meaning and by discovering new questions that lead to the next phases of our work.

Omnidirectional peer mentoring communities take many forms but to some extent hold consistent characteristics: regular communication among members, common ground found through shared values or experiences, and a firm level of trust allowing participants to be vulnerable, share frustrations, and not feel pressured to perform professionally. This is the group you naturally go to with questions, whether it be advice about the field or clarification on a work policy. At times you might communicate with the whole group and at other times it might be one individual or a subset of the large group, depending on the topic and need. Effectively navigating a work environment requires a contextual understanding of the institutional culture and having a group of peers who can step in and give guidance. Having both a contextual understanding and a group of peers improves the personal experience and fosters a sense of communal connection, which in turn strengthens and revitalizes our professional lives moment to moment and over time. By empowering each member to communicate and share experiences, groups like this help members discover opportunities, build each other's confidence, and jointly raise capacity and drive to contribute to making change at their institutions and in the field overall. In other words, omnidirectional mentoring groups help build critical mass.

All of these benefits are factors that keep people in a profession when they might otherwise become discouraged and leave. This speaks to the potential for omnidirectional mentoring communities to affect retention of underrepresented library staff and the direct benefits of a workplace that fosters the inclusion of enough viewpoints for an individual to find a group they can connect to. In this chapter, we discuss the theory behind omnidirectional mentoring groups, our own experiences forming groups that fit this model, the benefits and challenges of such an approach, as well as recommendations for those looking to adopt a similar strategy.

Theory

Omnidirectional Mentoring: Definitions

Mentoring relationships within the library and information science have been examined in a myriad of studies and are generally split between two main models: formal and informal.¹ “Formal” mentorship is traditionally defined as a top-down relationship, whereby a senior librarian provides advice for a junior librarian to further develop their career and/or to achieve tenure.² “Informal” mentorship, however, does not have one set definition, as it often encompasses

several mentoring models, such as bottom-up mentorship (where new librarians mentor senior librarians), peer mentorship (librarians at roughly equivalent places in their careers mentoring one another), and spot mentorship (mentorship “in the form of short-term help.”)³

This chapter focuses on the application to our lived experiences of a model originating in the field of education that has to date been minimally referenced: “omnidirectional” (or omni-directional) mentoring.⁴ Omnidirectional mentoring is perhaps the most encompassing of informal mentoring relationships, as it includes top-down, bottom-up, horizontal (or lateral, or peer), and spot mentoring across departments, individual job roles, and even institutions. While this approach could be used to describe a general “culture of mentoring” across an organization, its true value comes from the potential for engaging in intentional community building. When successful, that process instills trust among a small group of library practitioners, leading to the organic growth of one-to-one informal mentorship(s) that develop into a multidirectional experience. One member of the group may be mentored by several other members at a time, in more than one area of their career, and even beyond the professional sphere. This includes mentoring in areas such as professional development, day-to-day work activities, job searching, promotions, staff-to-librarian transitions, institutional knowledge, as well as self-care and other personal-professional practices.

Although the term “omnidirectional mentoring” may be fairly recent, omnidirectional mentoring models are not new to the library field. For instance, several professional organizations sponsor initiatives, such as the American Library Association (ALA)’s Spectrum Scholars⁵ and Emerging Leaders⁶ programs and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL)’s Career Enhancement Program,⁷ that serve as omnidirectional mentoring communities, allowing scholars and fellows to mentor and be mentored within their cohorts as well as across cohorts.⁸ In addition, we have seen in recent years the power of virtual connections to build community—for example, with We Here, an online “supportive community for black, indigenous, and people of color workers and students in libraries and archives,”⁹ which has grown in membership and recently expanded to include a Community School.

In this chapter, the authors also refer to the idea of “critical mass.” Originating within nuclear physics as the minimal amount of fissionable material required to start a chain reaction, the term is now “widely used to refer to any context in which things change after a certain number of people get together or enter a setting.”¹⁰ Critical mass is used in this chapter to refer to the sharing of individual experiences (often in narrative form) to determine if an issue or potential difficulty is experienced by more than one member and, therefore, if a collective

response rather than an individual one might be appropriate to enact broader change. For example, if one member shares that they have encountered problems in trying to build relationships with another department and other members note that they have encountered these same issues, there is an opportunity to bring the weight of the group to bear, allowing the community to examine the issue and decide whether this is a systemic problem or one based on individual circumstances.

Building critical mass also relates directly to the concept of resilience within libraries. One common critique of the idea of resilience in the workplace has to do with placing the onus on individuals to care for themselves within a structure that might not support this effort (and may actively work against it).¹¹ Members of a mentoring community can create a safe space to speak about difficult issues they encounter and may choose to process these issues as a community rather than individually, with the ultimate aim to enact positive change. This bolsters the confidence and ability of individuals to process and respond both to difficult situations and any of their own responses they may need to work through. It demonstrates that someone has their back. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for amplifying responses when warranted if each member of the group has the chance to reinforce this response or push for change when needed.

Strengths of the Model

The omnidirectional mentoring model's strength lies in its flexibility. Every member does not have to engage in similar work; in fact, the group can thrive with fresh perspectives provided by individuals who work in different library sectors. As laid out in James et al., "Informal mentorship has been considered as valuable and more widely accessible to mentees than formal mentorship."¹² This also means that cultural differences and other barriers to finding formal mentors who understand the nuances of an individual's situation need not be prohibitive to finding mentorship.

As mentioned, the key to omnidirectional mentoring is a process of organic growth within a group that occurs without specified time restraints. This is in contrast to formal mentoring relationships, which are primarily one-on-one and may have explicit organizational support or structure.¹³ Formal mentoring relationships may also use guiding documentation or a list of goals and responsibilities for both mentor and mentee with an established timeline; this timeline allows for the relationship to have a defined endpoint.¹⁴

In place of these synthetic structures, for omnidirectional mentoring, overlapping values or similarities in personalities, approaches, or goals are particularly important, since it is vital in informal mentorship to build a trusting and open relationship.¹⁵ This basis for trust can be established organically when individuals find they hold such things in common.¹⁶ By building mentorship relationships founded on trust (including trusting one another to assess and invite additional members) not only can mentoring relationships grow organically into an omnidirectional mentoring community, but the cultivation of critical mass also becomes an organic process.

In the next section, building on Amy Fyn's research, which emphasizes the role of narrative in building informal mentoring relationships,¹⁷ the authors present their personal narratives and discuss how they have built critical mass, served as mentors, and been mentored by omnidirectional mentoring communities in different aspects of their careers and personal lives.

Individual Narratives

Institutional Context

The community primarily discussed in this chapter coalesced initially over a period from 2017–2019 within a single workplace, the University of Michigan (U-M) Library, which is the central library of a large, distributed public university. Within the past year, this model has changed slightly as one member has switched institutional affiliations but continues to be an active part of the community, thus illustrating the durability of mentoring relationships based on trust and personal authenticity. The University of Michigan has a staff of more than 400 people; this abundance of employees creates many opportunities but also the danger of feeling lost or alone in an environment that can be complicated to decipher and navigate.

While the authors' omnidirectional mentoring community is informal in nature, its organic growth was supported by flexible options for engagement, overlapping interests, and robust institutional support for professional development opportunities. Authors got to know each other through formal, semi-formal, and informal networking opportunities connected to the institution. This included meet-and-greet sessions and tours for new hires, going out to lunch or coffee, introductions from more established colleagues, and after-work meet-ups such as happy hours or different types of exercise groups. The authors keep in communication via email, text, team projects, work events or lunches, and

meeting socially outside the workplace. Three of the authors (Sheila, Jesus, and Naomi) worked primarily in the same area of the library—learning and teaching—while Denise and Shannon Moreno (not an author but a member of the mentoring community) work in Operations, and Rachel’s unit is currently part of the university publishing department.

Every member of the authors’ omnidirectional mentoring community experiences and engages with the community on different levels; therefore, listening to multiple personal accounts is the best entry point to understanding the authors’ experiences of omnidirectional mentorship as well as critical mass.

Denise Leyton

Formal and informal mentors have shaped my career path and kept me in the profession, helping me explore my interests in the field, build my network, and create a professional community that enriches and supports my work life. I started working in libraries at the U-M Library as a course reserves undergraduate student worker in 2008. My career plan was to work in environmental non-profits, but nearing graduation, I decided that wasn’t for me and I was hired on as a full-time circulation assistant. My two direct colleagues were both pursuing a master of science in information (MSI) at the U-M School of Information. Through our everyday conversations, I learned about a new career path, and that inspired me to apply to graduate school, something I wouldn’t have done without their informal mentorship.

While in graduate school, I continued my job as a circulation assistant. I felt isolated in this position, cut off from much of the library, so I made many efforts to get to know people and be involved in the organization. One of these efforts was participating in my first formal mentorship program, which was run by the U-M Library. My mentor had a job working in digital archives, an area of the field in which I wanted to expand my knowledge. This structured program was one of the first ways I began to reach out and ask for help with my career. This initiative that I took supported a personal philosophy of mine, which is if you won’t advocate for yourself, who will? All of us need advocates at different times and places in our careers and we should feel empowered to seek those out. But it can be hard to know where to start, especially when your network is small or you’ve never done anything like this before. Mentorship programs are a way to build confidence as well as who you know. Also, the people who choose to be mentors are typically those who want to use their experience to help; meeting them can be particularly impactful. By participating in this program, I learned from my mentor about new career paths and saw a model for how to be a guide to

others getting started in libraries. I also got practice in taking the risk of reaching out and asking for help. All were lessons I carried forward in my career.

At the same time that I was in the mentorship program at the U-M Library, I joined the committee running the program. Based on feedback about the program, we saw a need for a less formal, in-between kind of program that we called the Library Colleague Connection, a buddy program meant to help new staff members get to know the library. The idea was that when a new person started, we would pair them with a buddy from a set group of volunteers. The volunteer's job would be to reach out and connect with the new person to help them informally learn about and acclimate to the U-M institutional environment. Though we didn't get the logistics of the program quite right, I learned some more lessons: to reach out to new staff when I can and to actively participate in institutional structures for getting to know people and welcoming them in.

These lessons led me to this particular omnidirectional mentoring community. I answered a call to be part of a pool of volunteers available for the new Residency Program participants to reach out to. Sheila reached out and we met for coffee. She mentioned wanting something social to do after work and so I organized a dinner; later, she told me that she and Naomi were going to train for a 5k and I said I was interested, and the group solidified from there. Saying yes and putting yourself forward is a way to forge connections, and we all did that.

In 2015, I made the transition from staff to librarian. I am currently the strategic projects coordinator in Library Environments focusing on UX work related to the in-person experience. I've been at the U-M Library the longest of those in our omnidirectional mentoring group, in a variety of positions, and that has given me knowledge that I can share. Since I've only worked at U-M, I've benefited from seeing how the other members have built their careers in different ways. I've learned about how to engage more using Twitter, new ways to approach professional development, DEI work, publishing, and how to ask for more formal mentoring again at a new stage. I've learned more about different types of librarianship and engagement with students, which has helped me change my perspective about what libraries offer, how to think critically about them, and where my career goals stand in that relationship.

Exploration through mentorship continues to help me expand my community, thinking, and understanding. Without it, I would not still be working in libraries.

Sheila García Mazari

Prior to joining U-M, my experience in libraries lay in the public libraries sector, where I worked with small teams without a formal mentorship structure. It was

not until I was named a 2016 Spectrum Scholar that I joined the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)'s Dr. E. J. Josey Spectrum Scholar Mentoring Program¹⁸ and was matched with my first formal mentor within librarianship. The Dr. E. J. Josey Mentoring Program was pivotal in my decision to pursue academic librarianship. However, once I did begin my residency at U-M, I found myself struggling with the transition.

My journey at U-M began and ended as a member of the 2017–2020 Diversity Alliance Residency cohort. The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Diversity Alliance residency program is meant to provide librarians from underrepresented backgrounds with the necessary knowledge and skills to be competitive candidates in the job market for tenure-track and/or permanent positions in academic librarianship.¹⁹ Being a resident is an interesting position to be in; I was continuously invited to take on new opportunities to pursue the aspects of academic librarianship that interested me the most. This was especially true during the first year of my residency, which consisted of three short-term departmental rotations as well as a year-long assessment project. Due to the rotational aspect of the first year, I had several supervisors to whom I reported; therefore, it was easy to agree to additional engagements outside of my daily job duties because my day-to-day changed on a three-month basis. However, navigating these transitions was challenging.

It was here that I found myself turning to peers in the library, individuals who understood the transition was difficult and let me vent my frustrations with acclimating to an environment that seemed to reject norms and values that are inextricably tied to my identity and personal well-being. My peer mentors in the library were individuals that worked across a variety of departments, and while the majority were early-career or new to the institution, some of my peers had spent years working in the library and understood its inner workings on a deeper level. The knowledge they contributed, from their expertise in different fields of librarianship to methods of self-care, helped me learn to create healthy workload boundaries and, further, to learn about library work that I had not been exposed to during my rotational year.

The mentorship, support, and exchange of ideas within my peer group eventually led to our recognizing a need for active self-care practices to be institutionally supported by the library, specifically for any library employee. Recognizing this need, a subgroup of our omnidirectional mentoring community was awarded a grant to create the Library Art Alliance.²⁰ The Art Alliance meets biweekly for one hour and provides a space for individuals to create, whether this takes the form of artwork, writing, or crafting. The Art Alliance organizers provide materials, and twice a year they invite a therapist to lead the group in art therapy

toward building a practice of self-care. While I left U-M in the fall of 2019, I have continued the practice of engaging in art creation as a restorative practice, and it has been core to my self-care as I learn to navigate and acclimate to a new institution. The Art Alliance has also continued to offer a place for library employees to disengage and focus their creative energies on themselves. The importance and impact of this work were recently recognized within the library when the Art Alliance was awarded the Diversity Award by the Library Diversity Council, illustrating the power of critical mass to influence even a large institution.

Jesus Espinoza

In many ways, my career in LIS has been completely framed by mentorship. It was partaking in the San Jose Public Library staff mentoring program while working as a Library Page that introduced me to the wide range of possibilities within librarianship. It was mentorship from a librarian of color while a student assistant at my undergraduate library that encouraged me to apply for graduate school and for scholarship opportunities like the Spectrum Scholarship and the ARL Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce (IRDW) Scholarship.

In graduate school, while my focus was on digital preservation and data curation, it was my IRDW mentor who encouraged me to explore outreach and engagement. I had been engaged in this work as part of my graduate school program's Student Advisory Board, but it was my mentor who identified it as a potential professional interest. During the job-hunting process, it was also she who suggested the possibility of a library residency.

As I began my first librarian-status position at U-M in 2017, peer mentorship was extremely important in making this transition and adjusting to a new city and state, a new job, and the university. Due to its size and structure, the University of Michigan and the library felt overwhelming at times. This was especially true during my first year as I had no permanent "home" department as a resident librarian. It was the peer mentoring community with the co-authors of this chapter that allowed me to better navigate the institution and provided opportunities for collaboration and experience. The fact that we were all early-career librarians with varying degrees of experience with the University of Michigan, professional organizations, and prior work experiences allowed us to connect over shared interests and learn from each other. As stated, this exchange was multidirectional; while I received guidance in how to get involved in library-wide groups and navigate various channels of communication, I could also impart my own knowledge based on involvement with professional organizations and committee work as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within our field. This

mentoring community was also important in providing a space to vent, discuss work-life balance and self-care, and build opportunities for collaboration.

I believe this mentoring community has also allowed us to act as mentors in other areas. I've worked with a staff member in our university's Student Life office as they were applying to library school and helped them with their Spectrum Scholarship applications. We all try to be proactive as potential mentors to the students we work with, especially those interested in librarianship.

Mentorship has been so integral to my development as a librarian, and I have been fortunate enough to have mentors through every stage of my career in libraries. The peer mentoring community highlighted in this chapter has been especially impactful to my personal and professional growth.

Naomi Binnie

Coming to U-M in the fall of 2017 was at once exciting and daunting. There was an element of culture shock. My first visit to the state of Michigan was for an in-person job interview. I had lived in large cities on the east coast for my entire life. I was inexperienced with the Midwest, college towns, and Midwest winters. I was also deeply ready for a change. I had worked in multiple university libraries in various cities for the prior ten years, and I knew what kind of library environment I preferred. I had worked in big and small libraries with varying budgets, from the obscenely large to the very limited. The U-M library had what I was looking for at the time: it was part of a large state school and research institution with notable financial resources. It boasted multiple libraries with lots of library staff, and it appeared to have excited librarians who were involved in innovative instruction programming and outreach. I was also somewhat shocked that I had finally made it to the kind of position I'd been working toward, a digital education librarian. I had worked as a non-librarian library staff for years, with no formal mentoring of any kind. I'd completed my MLIS and masters in instructional technology (MSIT) online, far away from my classmates and colleagues. I was not involved with national or regional library associations, and I generally felt disconnected from the library profession. It took me quite a while to figure out where I fit in the "library world," but this new job felt like a step in the right direction.

At the same time, I struggled with culture shock. Not only was I in a new state, town, and institution with only my partner and dog, I was also in an institution with a very different culture than the previous institution where I held my first librarian job. That institution was private, served mostly local and international students preparing for tech jobs, and was limited to a few buildings in the center

of Manhattan. The library was tiny, librarians had to play many roles every day, and professional development funding was limited.

While I was deeply excited about my new role, I was intimidated. I worried that I wasn't good enough, smart enough, ambitious enough, or in-the-know enough. I didn't feel properly trained to speak or write academically, I felt like my ideas were rarely good enough for a conference proposal, and I was uncomfortable with words like "pedagogy" and "praxis." My saving grace was peer mentorship. I was lucky enough to have a librarian friend in New York a couple of years ahead of me career-wise who showed me the ropes, introduced me to library instruction, and connected me to experienced librarians. That friend continued to support me as I left for U-M.

Coming to U-M and finding a group of like-minded librarians who were in a similar career stage as I was gratifying. While our relationships are based on friendship and trust, we have found many opportunities for collaboration on both work and professional projects. I've partnered on teaching and developing lesson plans with Sheila and Jesus, wrote and published an article about usability studies and e-learning with Denise, and partnered on an audio podcasting project with Rachel, among other things.

Having a cohort of new and early-career librarians to work and vent with was crucially important to my eventual comfort and confidence in my current role, and I can easily say that without this group, I would not be where I am today.

Rachel Woodbrook

My path within the library profession has led me from community college and special libraries to working as the data curation librarian at U-M. I have never participated in a formal mentoring program or relationship, but in each of my work contexts, I have come up against the questions mentorship is meant to address: how to be effective in a chosen profession (at a specific workplace or in the field more generally) and how to get where one needs or wants to go next. What I have experienced is that the answers to these questions are embodied in relationships and experiences over time, that coworkers are a crucially important part of the work environment, and that the personal and professional are permeable.

For a long time, due in part to limited exposure to the idea of informal mentoring, I would say that I did not have a good understanding of mentorship. I saw it as something I should be doing but wasn't sure how to pursue it. I felt intimidated and worried that mentorship as a structured system required me to know the answers to questions I was just learning to ask ("What do I

want to do next? Where do I see myself headed?”). What I can see looking back is that the most effective mentoring I encountered was coming from those I naturally turned to in order to answer the lower-stakes, day-to-day questions that shaped the larger trajectory I was on. These were often peers or near-colleagues, not necessarily established professionals or those above me in the organization, and people for whom I didn’t feel the need to consistently perform professionalism—we could talk about real challenges and admit uncertainty.

Mentorship, for me, has focused on answering questions around context—and this is why it has been so valuable to find myself part of an omnidirectional mentoring community at U-M after I began working there in 2018. I first met Naomi for coffee, then joined an informal after-work exercise meet-up with her and some other library employees. Making the transition from special to academic librarianship included many culture shifts, and especially in situations where I didn’t know what questions to ask, it was helpful to be around others who were more experienced in translating their work into the larger institutional and professional context (for example, submitting conference proposals). Rather than trying to ask someone already established to remember what had worked for them years ago, this was a chance to talk through the process with others facing similar challenges, creating a supportive environment in which to work through uncertainty and learn how to be most effective in a local context.

In addition to this perspective, the omnidirectional mentoring community at U-M has been helpful in deconstructing institutional situations and policies in a way that is validating. I have found out about and collaboratively submitted proposals (such as this chapter!) of which I may not otherwise have been aware. I have requested accessibility feedback on survey tools I created, participated in broader conversations in the field, and have been able to get enough background to feel comfortable speaking up in larger institutional contexts. I have also contributed review, feedback, and encouragement on résumés, presentations, and writing. Going back to the overarching purpose of mentoring, the experience has been about making connections: between my own work and the larger professional context, between different parts of the library, and to different parts of the field where I may not have realized my own work applies.

What keeps people in a career is not just advancing professionally, but also feeling understood, encouraged, and excited about the opportunity to build and grow and move forward—that is what this mentoring community has felt like to me.

Recommendations

While the authors were fortunate to find each other at the same institution, this likely won't be the case for many. There are often differences in opportunities based on the type of institution in which one works (e.g., the institution's size, culture, private or public status, or whether it is primarily staffed by locals or transplants), so there won't always be a built-in cohort of like-minded folks to connect with. With this in mind, we provide some recommendations based on our own experiences for those who want to find or foster omnidirectional mentoring groups.

For Individuals

Our version of omnidirectional mentorship relies on friendship and camaraderie, rather than being based strictly on career steps and strategies, and it prioritizes self-care and shared storytelling. The focus is on the whole person, not just the work-self. In our case, we even shared a physical exercise that manifested as a "run club" and in shared Zumba classes. At the same time, our relationships aren't solely friendships; we spend much of our time discussing what is happening at our organization, strategizing, and coaching each other through different (often difficult) situations.

FINDING MEMBERS

Although assembling an omnidirectional mentoring group will be more challenging in some institutions than others, we believe the most important factor in creating an effective omnidirectional mentoring group is shared values²¹ and that anyone in your institution is a potential partner. This may mean crossing staff/librarian or hierarchical lines in your organization, as advice, support, and camaraderie transcend the lines of ascribed job duties. Creating a group with a diversity of roles and locations within your institution may also help you understand multiple perspectives you otherwise would not see.

For those specifically in librarian roles, be aware that the power structures in your institution are likely biased toward these positions as opposed to those of individuals functionally classified as staff. All library employees hold institutional knowledge and have experience navigating the social and political streams within their institutions, and varying perspectives can deepen your group's collective understanding of, for example, how roles within an institution are affected differently by organizational decisions. However, librarians

should not assume that all non-librarian staff are interested in becoming librarians or that they want or need mentorship. In this vein, it's important for anyone looking to create an omnidirectional peer mentoring community to be intentional about making space for those with different job titles who may be interested in participating; again, look for people across your organization (and even outside the library) with whom you share professional and/or personal values and who may find a peer mentorship relationship mutually beneficial.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND VIRTUAL CONNECTIONS

As well as looking across roles, those hoping to find omnidirectional mentorship should look beyond their immediate environment for professional and peer connections. This might be especially applicable for folks at smaller institutions. Think about the different areas you may want to explore or learn more about and the expertise and limitations of your current network. Conferences are often a natural place to meet early-career librarians or others in your field; however, professional development funds are limited for many, so this isn't always an option. Regional library associations and cohort groups are often a lower-cost choice, requiring far less travel, and can serve as a less intimidating environment in which to make connections. Making virtual connections, however, is both crucial and free. Twitter is a common tool for connecting virtually. Librarians at all career stages, as well as MLIS graduate students and other academics, often use Twitter to vent, discuss trends, and find like-minded virtual friends. While Twitter also opens up the possibility for stress (due to information overload, cancel culture,²² doxxing,²³ or a general fear of not saying the right thing or not being up-to-date on current trends or conversations), it is an important tool for connecting with others, especially when in-person connections are difficult to create or maintain.

EMOTIONAL LABOR, NEEDS, AND BOUNDARIES

If you are part of a peer group, be aware of who you're tapping into and for what kind of labor you're asking. Remember that you don't have to check in with each person about every issue you encounter, which is part of the benefit and flexibility of democratizing the mentorship relationship—everyone contributes what they can with their relevant experience and knowledge. When it comes to issues of DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility), be aware of the labor you're asking for from others and whether they signed up for it or not.

Check in with your group to see who's available for a chat or to work through an issue. Be aware and self-reflective when confronting issues of identity and personal development. What are others' bandwidths in terms of time, resources, and workload? Know your needs and boundaries and pay attention to the needs and boundaries of others in your group.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

There are, of course, challenges to creating and maintaining omnidirectional mentor relationships. Building relationships that extend beyond the professional sphere requires finding time around the edges of work, which is especially challenging for those with long commutes or who are caretakers for children or other family members. In these cases, asynchronous communication or inviting a few people together for an informal work lunch might be good ways to start. In addition, some work environments are inherently toxic, making trust and friendship difficult to build. We also recognize that not everyone will have a large enough pool to draw from in their immediate organization or the same levels of access to technology. However, if there is anything we are learning through the challenges of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is how to leverage whatever technologies we have access to in order to stay connected.

BUILDING TRUST

If you do have a formal mentor, we recommend making sure this person is someone you like and get along with if possible. We see positive feelings as a requirement for building trust, which is very important in deciding to take personal or professional risks.

Create boundaries and protect them. Ultimately, you cannot build trust without time and risk. Your definition of risk may be different from that of others. It may be that you identify as introverted and feel uncomfortable making social connections. Consider whether or not you are willing to challenge yourself to meet and connect with new people. Know your risk tolerance and what you are willing to give. If there are opportunities and structures set up at your library to meet people, take advantage of them at the level that you are comfortable with or even take the opportunity to step outside your comfort zone. If there are no opportunities, and you are up for it, take the initiative to create them yourself. Mentoring groups are communities, and we all play a role in building and maintaining our organizational communities.

For Institutions

Our advice for institutions is to facilitate connections. Our library—part of a very large institution—is often onboarding new staff. A number of us were new to the library and connected during the first few weeks of our employment, thanks to tours, meetings, or outings that were scheduled with the intention of connecting new employees to library departments. During these events, we were able to meet each other as well as librarians at all stages of their careers. Some departments within the library also had a culture of connecting new librarians right away and encouraging coffee and lunch outings with various staff throughout the library.

Consider the resident librarian roles common in academic libraries;²⁴ these roles are intended for new librarians, often straight from MLIS programs. While these roles are not perfect, they can be used as a model for institutions hiring new or early-career librarians by duplicating some of the practices used in resident librarian jobs. Residents are often able to move between departments, allowing for work relationships to develop throughout the library, and they are typically expected to learn on the job and take part in a variety of projects, allowing them to develop their interests and expertise. Duplicating these practices allows for the space and time needed for new hires to create wide-ranging relationships that can serve as the foundation for omnidirectional peer mentorship.

Promoting a culture of connection and camaraderie can go a long way in helping potential mentoring community members find each other. When an institution creates opportunities for connection and manages the scheduling of social outings and events, they create a safe space for a new hire to meet others. This also takes the burden off the new hire, who may be introverted or intimidated as they start a new job. The more structure and consistency there are in setting up ways for people to connect and meet with each other, the better.

Finally, we want to note that making space for omnidirectional peer mentoring will positively impact overall work culture by deconstructing the power structures inherent in the traditional mentoring model and by allowing individuals to share and validate both positive and negative work experiences. In their experience, the authors found that this process of sharing and validation can lead to dialogue for positive change in the broader library to create a more inclusive and equitable work environment. Without these communities of peer support, it can be difficult, particularly for individuals new to an organization to know that they are not alone in wanting or needing change.

Conclusion

Mentorship is vital within academic libraries. This is especially true for early-career librarians and staff—and particularly those of underrepresented identities. Omnidirectional mentorship can foster a community that encourages peer learning and growth as well as inspiration and impetus for change within institutions and the field at large. The potential benefits transcend the areas traditionally associated with mentorship and professional development as they intersect with self-care, wellness, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many aspects of the model can be applied across a variety of settings and contexts. We have already seen the widespread impact of virtual communities, such as We Here and resident librarian cohort groups, that have expanded to create and offer their own programs, workshops, and training.²⁵ These communities have a primary focus on peer mentorship and omnidirectional mentorship and have leveraged this to make a significant impact on the profession. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating and developing a mentoring community, but the recommendations mentioned in this chapter are scalable and can be applied and adapted as appropriate to what may best serve an institutional, community, or individual need. Facilitating and fostering a peer and omnidirectional mentoring community has the potential for profound personal and professional impact for the individual, as well as the potential for significant change and progress for the institution and the profession.

ENDNOTES

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